

BS 1710: NEW TESTAMENT 1

“BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD: SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD”

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Introduction

To understand the New Testament world, we need to first understand the significant details of the Second Temple Period. The chart below represents the major periods of history that impacted the Near Eastern world.

<i>Period</i>	<i>Time Frame</i>
1. Babylonian Period	606-539 BC
2. Persian Period	539-331 BC
3. Greek Period	331-167 BC
Alexander the Great	331-320 BC
Ptolemaic Period	320-198 BC
Seleucid / Syrian Period	198-167 BC
4. Jewish Self-Rule	167-63 BC
Maccabean Period	167-142 BC
Hasmonean Period	142-63 BC
5. Roman Period	63 BC-70 AD

This period has been called the Second Temple Period because it began with the destruction of the first temple – the Temple of Solomon – at the hands of the invading Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar (18 July 586 BC).¹ And it ended with the destruction of the Second Temple – dedicated by Zerubbabel in 515 BC – at the hands of the Romans in AD 70.

The Babylonian Period (606-539 BC)

The Old Testament contains specific details about the Babylonian rise to power in the Ancient Near East. In regard to the Holy Land, the Northern Kingdom had already fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC. They had been judged for emphasizing the ceremonial aspects of the covenant with God above the practical and ethical elements of their covenant relationship. In short, they had taken on the appearance of corporate holiness – their lips drew near to God – but had neglected, and even actively denied, the ethical demands of the Law – their hearts remained far from God. Idolatry, too, had become a poison in the veins of the covenant community. And so, for 8th Century BC Israel, Assyria became the rod of the Lord’s discipline. But Assyria’s political preeminence was relatively short-lived and their influence in Judah was limited.² The

¹ See here the accounts of 2 Kings 25:3 and Jeremiah 39:2.

² Here we are careful to note that Assyrian control in Judah was extensive even though they failed to capture Jerusalem. Isaiah’s prophecy says that Assyria would “sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to the neck” (Isaiah 8:8, NIV). For the historical fulfillment, see Isaiah 36 & 37.

Babylonian period began in 606 BC, as Nebuchadnezzar marched his military forces into the Southern Kingdom of Judah and conquered her lands. Later, in 586 BC, the temple would be destroyed and Jerusalem would be forcefully subdued.

The custom of King Nebuchadnezzar was to deport the higher classes of conquered people to Babylon. In Judah, this meant the deportation of Daniel, Ezekiel, and others, while a new king was installed to rule under Babylonian authority.³ It was under this king's rule that Solomon's Temple was destroyed, for an attempted insurrection had taken place in those days. In regard to the captives, our textbook says, "This *deportation created a theological crisis for the Jews* in the dispersion. The dissolution of the monarchy, the loss of the ceremonial sanctuary, and the proximity to Gentiles all created moral and ceremonial problems for those living outside of Judea."⁴ What resulted was an emphasis on law-keeping. For the deported, the ceremonial and ritual observances of the law could no longer take place in Babylon. For those left behind, the destruction of the temple also ensured that such practices were discontinued. Judah would subsequently witness the rise of the synagogue, a place where believers could meet to discuss the ramifications of the law. The discussion also undoubtedly centered on the purity of the spiritual community. The Jews recognized that their idolatry had been punished; they were confronted with the truth that Yahweh would not tolerate the worship of other gods. So, during the exile, idolatry was denounced among the Jewish people. It seems, at least for the time being, that they had learned their lesson.

The Persian Period (539-331 BC)

History shows that on 29 October, 539 BC, Cyrus the Great rode into Babylon and announced that a new dynasty had arrived on the scene in the ancient world. A new "King of Babylon" had come to fulfill a specific divine purpose. The Bible tells us that Cyrus' military success was due to the hand of God. It was Israel's God who would liberate his people through a counter-intuitive plan; he would strengthen a pagan monarch, calling him to be the Lord's "Messiah."⁵ Like the Babylonian Period, the Persian Period is detailed in several biblical accounts.⁶ Cyrus, in regard to his foreign policy, was moved in a completely different direction than Nebuchadnezzar. Whereas the latter had gathered the socially elite in trying to create uniformity in the Babylonian Empire, the former chose instead to allow captive people to continue in their separate faiths and various spiritual practices. This was likely due to the fact that Cyrus wanted to gain the favor of the gods, whichever they were and wherever they were worshipped. The result was a favorable disposition toward the Jews and the restoration of Jerusalem. Thus, when Ezra asked for permission to return to Palestine, his request was honored. Slowly but surely, the remnant returned with provisions for the monumental task of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls and temple. In the years that followed, Persia became a large empire, ruling over vast territories that stretched from Ethiopia to India.

The Persian influence in the Holy Land endured for more than 200 years. Then, as a result of several conflicts with the Greeks, the Persian Empire weakened. Attempts to subdue the Greeks

³ This is the reign of King Zedekiah – formerly known by his Jewish name Mattaniah – as chronicled in 2 Kings 24.

⁴ Kostenberger 2009, 63.

⁵ Isaiah 44:28 speaks of Cyrus as the Lord's "shepherd" and 45:1 refers to Cyrus as the Lord's "anointed" (or Messiah). The purpose for Cyrus' rise to power was the political – not spiritual – deliverance of God's people.

⁶ Most notably, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and the aforementioned chapters in Isaiah's prophecy... but also found in Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and parts of the Psalms, Daniel, and 2 Chronicles.

